

Pat Quinn, Governor
Joe Klinger, Interim Director

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IEMA Kicks Off School Screening Program during Radon Action Month

\$38,000 grant will help 50 school districts test buildings for radon

SPRINGFIELD – A \$38,000 grant recently awarded to the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) will be used to help 50 Illinois school districts screen school buildings for the radioactive gas radon. IEMA announced the screening program today as it kicked off a statewide observance of Radon Action Month during January.

“While thousands of homes in Illinois already have been tested for radon, very few school buildings have been screened,” said IEMA Interim Director Joe Klinger. “Thanks to this grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, we’re able to partner with the American Lung Association of Illinois to help 50 school districts test their buildings.”

Radon is a colorless, odorless, tasteless radioactive gas that comes from the radioactive decay of naturally occurring uranium in the soil. Radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S., and the leading cause among non-smokers. It’s estimated that nearly 1,200 radon-related lung cancer deaths occur each year in Illinois.

The radon screening program announced today will help participating schools comply with recommendations contained in Public Act 96-0417, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2010. The law, sponsored by state Rep. Karen May (D-Highland Park), encourages school districts to test school buildings for radon every five years.

To reduce the cost to school districts for the radon tests, the law allows district employees to complete an online training course approved by IEMA in order to perform screening measurements in their district school buildings. By using a trained school district employee to conduct the tests, districts won’t have the expense of hiring a licensed radon measurement contractor.

"This is such an important issue for the health of our citizens," said Rep. May. "I am so pleased we will be able to start to cover some of the costs of screening our schools, where children, teachers and staff spend several hours each day."

Under the school screening program, IEMA and the American Lung Association of Illinois (ALAIL) will work with participating school districts on development of a quality assurance project plan and a final report, as well as providing guidance for placement of measurement devices in one elementary school building in each district.

"The ALAIL is pleased to partner with IEMA and Illinois school districts in testing their buildings for radon gas," said American Lung Association of the Upper Midwest CEO, Harold Wimmer. "Through this partnership, we can help determine if radon is a concern in schools."

In addition to the USEPA grant, IEMA recently acquired free radon measurement equipment from the State of Michigan. This will enable the agency to loan measurement devices to school districts to further reduce the costs of the screening measurements.

The USEPA has established 4.0 picocuries per liter of air (pCi/L) as the action level for radon. It is estimated that the risk of developing lung cancer at that level is about seven lung cancer deaths per 1,000 persons. The USEPA and IEMA recommend taking steps to reduce radon levels if test results indicate levels of 4.0 pCi/L or above.

More information about radon is available at IEMA's radon website at www.radon.illinois.gov.